



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

REGION 4
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October 26, 2009

Mrs. Carmen Ferrer
EIS Team Lead
Naval Surface Warfare Center, Panama City Division
Code XPF1
110 Vernon Avenue
Panama City, Florida 32407-7001

SUBJECT: Final Environmental Impact Statement/Overseas Environmental Impact Statement
for Proposed New and Increased Mission Activities at the Naval Surface Warfare
Center Panama City Division in Florida; CEQ Number 20090326

Dear Mrs. Ferrer:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the referenced Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)/Overseas EIS in accordance with its responsibilities under Section 309 of the Clean Air Act and Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The U.S. Department of the Navy (Navy) proposes to intensify current and add new air, surface, subsurface, sonar, electromagnetic, laser, ordnance and projectile firing-related research, development, test and evaluation (RDT&E) activities at the Naval Surface Warfare Center Panama City Division (NSWC PCD) in Bay County, Florida. The Final EIS addresses all of the RDT&E operations that occur within the NSWC PCD study area, which includes St. Andrew Bay and three military warning areas (W-155, W-151, and W-470) in the Gulf of Mexico off the coasts of Alabama and Florida.

Three alternatives were considered in the Final EIS: 1) no action alternative – maintain current and historical mission activities within the NSWC PCD study area; 2) Alternative 1 – enhances current capabilities by incorporating new test capabilities and includes projected increases to the tempo and intensity of RDT&E activities; and 3) Alternative 2 – same as Alternative 1 with some increases in RDT&E operations. Alternative 2 was identified as the preferred alternative.

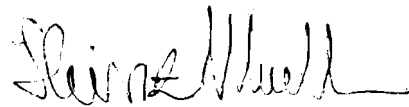
EPA's primary concerns raised in the review of the Draft EIS were related to the potential impacts of the proposed action on fisheries, marine mammals, and special biological areas. EPA's comments addressed the lack of specificity in the Draft EIS as it related to the development of alternative strategies to avoid impacts to these resources and the lack of information in the Draft EIS to substantiate a number of conclusions about the extent of impacts described. EPA appreciates the responses to our comments in the Final EIS. The inclusion of additional information in the impacts section of the EIS and a more robust section on the proposed mitigation and monitoring measures was particularly helpful. EPA supports the Navy's

inclusion of a number of important protective measures that would be implemented for certain operations and for identifying a number of areas that would be avoided during certain operations and at certain times of the year. EPA strongly recommends that the Navy include these specific commitments in the Record of Decision for the project.

The commitment on the part of the Navy to develop an Integrated Comprehensive Monitoring Program (ICMP) is important given the magnitude of proposed RDT&E activities and the geographic size of the study area. EPA supports the development of a comprehensive monitoring program to ensure that the ongoing impacts from these activities are assessed and appropriately addressed/mitigated once identified. However, it appears that the focus of the ICMP will be limited to marine mammals and other threatened and endangered species. In accordance with the Navy's newly implemented Water Range Sustainability Environmental Program Assessment Policy, EPA also recommends that the monitoring be expanded to include some additional items not currently discussed. In addition to analyzing behavioral responses of marine mammals to certain activities, the ICMP should also address the effectiveness of the other protective measures in avoiding and reducing impacts to important biological areas, such as seagrass, areas of known hardbottom habitat, coral reefs, or essential fish habitat. EPA views this commitment as an opportunity to conduct important impact assessment monitoring and utilize adaptive management to adjust RDT&E activities in the future depending on the outcome.

We appreciate the opportunity to review the proposed action. Please contact Ben West of my staff at (404) 562-9643 if you have any questions or want to discuss our comments further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heinz J. Mueller", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heinz J. Mueller, Chief
NEPA Program Office
Office of Policy and Management